ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE D-1

MIAMI HERALD
28 April 1985

VIETNAM

America's last day was also my longest

Tom Polgar, CIA station chief in Saigon when the last Americans were evacuated from Vietnam on April 30, 1975, and now a resident of Central Florida, wrote this article for The Herald.

By TOM POLGAR

I woke to the sound of heavy explosions. It was 4 a.m. Tuesday, April 29, 1975. Here we go again, I thought. Saigon airport was bombed last evening, rockets hit downtown Saigon on Sunday. Was I now hearing the beginning of an all-out attack on Saigon by the North Vietnamese?

I called the duty officer at the American Embassy. He said that the airport was under heavy fire, both rockets and heavy artillery, but there was still no damage assessment.

Clearly, this was a dramatic turn of events. I knew that with that much noise there was bound to be heavy damage. If the runways became unusable, the evacuation process that had been going on routinely for the past couple of weeks would be halted. That in turn would force the U.S. government to make some hard decisions and quickly. I knew my place was at the embassy, to pull together whatever intelligence might become available and to keep Washington informed.

The weather was hot and muggy, typical for Saigon. I put on slacks and a sport shirt. Little did I know that I would be wearing this casual outfit on national television or that I would wear these clothes for a week.

Leaving my bedroom, I turned back, and guided by some sixth sense, stuck my passport in my pocket and took along my camera, prescription medicine and checkbook. I knew there would be a rough day ahead, but I could not bring myself to believe that I would never see my elegant French villa again.

As I came downstairs, around 4:30 a.m., I found the lights ablaze and the dining room set for a formal meal. The two live-in servants also heard the explosions and assumed I would go to the embassy. For their part, they were ready to serve breakfast, dressed as usual in snow-white pajama pants and white tunics — the traditional wear of high-class house servants in Vietnam.

I told the ladies I was not hungry but would like to talk to them about the future. Supposing the end has come for the Americans in Vietnam, what did they want to do?

The grandmotherly older servant said she wanted to stay in Vietnam. This was her home, she knew nothing else. Surely the Communists would not harm an old woman. Weighing less than 90 pounds, who would consider her a threat? She had relatives in Saigon, she would move in with them.

The younger maid wanted out of Vietnam. Her boyfriend was a soldier, they would leave together and make a life in the free world. Could she take off right now to find her boyfriend?

I concurred with what they wanted to do. I gave the old lady all the money I had on me and asked her to stay near the telephone until she heard from me again.

My faithful driver, Ut, was ready, the 6-year-old Chevrolet polished to a high shine, as usual. We left the house a little after 5 a.m. The streets were empty. There was a 24-hour curfew in effect. On the way to the embassy, a ride I took with Ut a thousand times, I asked him what he wanted to do. He wanted to leave Vietnam, but only if he could take his family, extended family that is. Well, how many? One wife, seven children, his parents, her parents, he had brothers, they had children and so forth. How many? Ut said maybe three dozen. Can you get them to the embassy? Only by collecting them in person, Ut replied. After you drop me off at the embassy, go get your family, I told him. Ut was dubious. This was going to be a very difficult day. Surely I would need him to drive me around.

I realized then, and it is even clearer in retrospect, that my personal experiences with the Vietnamese, both official and personal, were

Continued

different from what many Americans claim to have had with the "slopes" or the "gooks."

At the embassy I found the reporting still fragmentary, but informal comments from military and CIA personnel in the airport area all pointed to an inescapable conclusion: Damage to the runways made takeoffs by fixed-wing aircraft questionable, to put it mildly.

Other bad news: Several "Huey" helicopters of Air America — the CIA's own airline — were destroyed. The loss of these choppers would reduce our capability to make roof-top pickups, an important ingredient of the embassy's evacuation planning.

From the roof of the embassy we could see the smoke from major fires in the airport area.

I asked the duty officer to activate our system calling all personnel for emergency duty and to get ready to distribute "travel envelopes," each of which contained $1,500 in U.S. currency. The money was meant to be given to all personnel on the assumption that the evacuation process might take them to some corner of East Asia, where they would have to make their own way to the United States.

Then I called the ambassador, Graham A. Martin. A habitual "night person," he went to bed late. I knew he was suffering from a bad case of bronchitis, but I had to ask him to come to the embassy immediately. He would come at once.

In the meantime, embassy personnel were arriving in a steady stream. By 7 a.m. most were in their offices, putting their papers in order and waiting for instructions.

When Ambassador Martin arrived, it was clear he was not well. An untiring and selfless person, he drove himself even harder than he drove his staff. On the morning of the 29th he suffered from assorted ills. Mentally as alert as ever, he was so hoarse he could hardly talk. It became my lot to listen to the ambassador's whispers and to relay his remarks on the phone to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and to Adm. Noel Gayler, then the U.S. commander in chief in the Pacific.

The substance of the discussions was that the evacuation of nonessential personnel should be pushed with all possible speed, but in the morning hours of April 29, there was no suggestion from Washington or Saigon that the American Embassy would cease to function later that day.

Around 8 a.m. the "Country Team" — senior officers of the embassy — met with the ambassador. The discussion focused on the condition of the runways. Can we continue with the fixed-wing evacuation?

The other important topic: What were North Vietnamese intentions regarding a continuing U.S. presence? No clear conclusions were reached on either point, but the first one was easier to resolve: The ambassador would drive out to Tan Son Nhut to inspect the runways.

While the brass was meeting [illegible] the ambassador, two important processes got under way and gathered momentum. American officials were using all possible means to contact Vietnamese with suggestions that they make their way to the embassy or to a designated pickup point. Meanwhile, on their own, literally thousands of people, including foreign diplomats, Vietnamese dignitaries and just plain people started to stream through the embassy's gates. Unusual and unprecedented as it was, all these people were admitted to the embassy grounds with a minimum of formality or fuss. The atmosphere was tense, but things proceeded in a calm and orderly manner till about noon.

We had cause for a quick chuckle when a senior Hungarian officer came to my office to ask that we assist him in the rescue of his comrades stranded at the airfield as a result of North Vietnamese shelling and South Vietnamese seizure of the Hungarian vehicles. It is not often that an official of a Communist government asks the CIA for help! We did help and all turned out well.

Around 9:30 a.m. the ambassador told me that President Ford had ordered a reduction of embassy size from about 600 to a hard core of 150, with the CIA filling 50 positions. I was to work out a staffing pattern. I immediately huddled with my colleagues to come up with a solution. The problem was not easy. We had to find the proper mixture of operations officers, linguistic talent, analysts, typists, communicators and so forth. We also had to consider emotional stability, sense of discipline, commitment, family situations and, indeed, courage for activities in what was clearly going to be an unfriendly environment.

Frankly, I did not understand the purpose of the exercise. I could not imagine that the Communists would tolerate a large CIA station in Saigon. Still, the ambassador had his instructions from the president, I had mine from the ambassador and we were going to do our best.

As events turned out, it would have been far better to use this time and the attention of the senior people involved for putting the finishing touches on the evacuation process.

Throughout the morning I was tied to my desk. There was a steady flow of visitors and a barrage of telephone calls. All the news was bad. The South Vietnamese Armed Forces were in dissolution. The National Police was no more. Conditions bordering on anarchy were developing. Looting was reported. We had to make some unconventional deals to ensure that the embittered soldiery would not interfere with the evacuation.

Around mid-morning I had word from the new South Vietnamese president, Gen. Duong Van "Big" Minh. He wanted all American military personnel out of Vietnam within 24 hours. As a favor to him, would we evacuate his daughter and son-in-law? We agreed on both points.

The American Embassy were not like a three-ring circus, but like a 33-ring circus with no ringmaster. The embassy was simply not organized to handle control and communications problems in the chaos that was descending on us. Improvisation became the order of the day.

The courage, initiative and commitment of the individual officers saved the lives of many thousands of Vietnamese, but what we had was a multitude of spectacular solo performances, not an orchestrated effort.

In the meantime, all personnel not immediately involved with moving Vietnamese were engaged in destroying files. In the streets, conditions were still relatively orderly. Some staff people were taking advantage of the lull to return to their homes, pack a bag, pay off servants and dispose of their pets. While the wise ones had sent their dogs and cats out of country weeks before, there were still many American pets in Saigon. One officer felt he had no choice but to shoot his two boxers, a deed easier on the dogs than on their master.

Shortly before noon, Saigon time, we got word from the ambassador that President Ford ordered the embassy closed and all Americans out by nightfall. With the runways at Tan Son Nhut deemed unusable, we undertook what was to be the largest helicopter movement of people in history.

My immediate staff was still working on the future 50-man station. Scrap all of that. Now there was only one priority: Get hold of as many Vietnamese associates as possible and insert them into the evacuation channel. Easier said than done. Saigon was a huge city, many Vietnamese had no telephones, the frequent curfews changed people's living habits, many left their homes and moved in with relatives. Last but not least, word of the American decision spread like wildfire, dissolved the last remnants of military discipline, clogged the streets and surrounded the American Embassy with an impenetrable wall of people.

The "front office" remained functional. Situation reports were still being sent, intelligence still kept coming in, mostly by telephone. One of the secretaries took out her bitterness on the electric typewriters. She hammered away on the revolving cylinders to make sure no Communists would type on them. Others gave vent to their feelings by trampling pictures of the president and Kissinger.

In an inexplicable oversight, Adm. Donald Whitmire, commanding the Navy's evacuation task force, was not alerted by Washington that a decision to pull out of the embassy might be imminent. When the word came, planes and pilots were not ready. More than three hours went by before the first Navy chopper arrived to transfer people to ships off shore. The loss of three daylight hours cost us dearly and in the end contributed to the failure to evacuate some 5,000 Vietnamese and other Asians from the embassy grounds.

Continued

In the office, telephones kept ringing. Each call brought more bad news. Key people, important contacts, could not make their way to the pickup points. Designated helicopter landing areas were overrun by Vietnamese mobs at the sound of approaching choppers.

By early afternoon it was impossible to get in and out of the embassy. The pressure of the crowds on the gates was such that the Marines dared not open them for fear they would be overwhelmed by the onrushing crowds. Armed South Vietnamese soldiers, some deserters and some from broken up units, roamed the streets, spreading fear and confusion.

The telephones kept working. My old maid, still at the residence, informed me that a lot of people were assembling there. Some came because they heard it was a good place from which to catch a helicopter. Others remembered earlier unspecific suggestions that in case of trouble they should come to my home. Some simply had faith in the transcendental powers of the CIA.

By mid-afternoon there were some 150 people at the house, including a deputy prime minister, the chief of protocol, senior military and police officers with their families, Vietnamese employees of the embassy who could not make their way to the embassy, my maid and her boyfriend, my Vietnamese dentist and her family, two children of a dead Vietnamese general.

I felt a great responsibility for these people, but what to do? I could not leave the embassy; my priorities were still the CIA station and the ambassador. My driver Ut suggested that he would climb over the embassy wall, get to the house and serve as a guide for the group.

The adventures of these people as they wandered from one location to another for some five hours through the streets of Saigon make a separate story. Suffice it to say that after a lot of excitement, all of them made it to safe haven except for Ut and his family. Because he could not help all the people he felt responsible for, he declined the opportunity to be lifted across the embassy fence, which is how we got in the last group of 30 or 35 people around 10 p.m.

As the evening grew into night several things emerged:

- While the North Vietnamese were happy to see the Americans depart and did nothing to interfere with the evacuation, it was impossible to move all the South Vietnamese we wanted to take along.
- The pilots had been awake and flying for many hours without rest. There were limits beyond which they could not safely continue.
- Roof-top landings by the Air America choppers, hazardous at best, were beyond acceptable risks in hours of darkness.
- Washington was getting increasingly edgy about the possibility that the North Vietnamese would reach downtown Saigon and capture the remaining Americans.

As load after load took off from the embassy grounds, there was little left for me to do. I made sure that no sensitive materials were left in our offices, I said goodbye to departing personnel, I wandered the halls. I called my house for the last time. My old servant was still there. I told her to take anything from the house she wanted. I asked her to try to take care of my dog and parrot. I told her it would be best if she left the house before the North Vietnamese arrived.

In the early hours of April 30 I supervised the destruction of CIA communications equipment. Just before we blew up our last machine I composed my most painful message as chief of station: " . . . wish to advise this will be final message from Saigon Station . . . ." The flash of our explosive charges was widely reported as mortars hitting the embassy. The misreporting of events in Vietnam continued to the very end.

As the White House and the secretary of state became insistent that the evacuation be terminated and that all Americans be lifted out, Ambassador Martin kept fighting for time. As long as he remained, the evacuation could not be completed; the longer it went on, the more Vietnamese could be taken out. He talked himself past several presidential deadlines, but the intervals between helicopters became longer and longer.

Martin

There were going to be only 20 more flights, we were told by Washington, then 14, then 10, with the ambassador literally begging for more, a dozen more, six more.

Around 4 a.m. Saigon time — 4 p.m. in Washington — President Ford had had enough. Kissinger called a press conference for 5 p.m. and announced the end of the evacuation. The president ordered the ambassador and those of us remaining with him to board the next helicopter. And so the Americans left, with thousands of Vietnamese and other Asians left stranded on the embassy grounds.

As we trudged up to the embassy roof for the last time, no words were spoken. We all knew how we felt.

The flight to the U.S.S. Blue Ridge was tense but uneventful. Once we were on board the Navy helped us communicate with our families. I still remember the text of my message: "Left Saigon by helicopter, now safe on board U.S. warship. See you soon."

At 7 a.m., April 30, 1975, I found my assigned bunk and prepared to go to sleep. My longest and saddest day had ended. My tour in Saigon was finished. So was the American presence, after 30 years of official U.S. engagement in the affairs of Vietnam.